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ABSTRACT

More and more frequently, poor families are described in pathological terms. The emphasis is on the deficits that interfere with the education of poor children, rather than the strengths that they can bring to schooling. A focus on the devastating effects of poverty may lead to the belief that poor children are so disadvantaged that nothing can be done to help them. A more appropriate focus is on what the schools should do to be ready for poor children. Research has demonstrated that inadequate preparation for the task of teaching affects achievement in reading, language arts, and mathematics, but may have the most impact on teaching reasoning and thinking skills. Research has also indicated that reading and mathematics achievement is linked to school characteristics, and that student characteristics do not determine performance. The complex ingredients of effective education--high expectations, engaging materials, modern equipment, a demanding curriculum, an orderly environment, strong leadership, and clear goals--all play a part. But the education, training, and experience of a child's teacher may be the most important ingredient of all. Contains 10 references. (SLD)

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SCHOOL READINESS AND POOR CHILDREN

As a society, and as educators, we generally agree that many, if not most, poor children -- especially children of color -- don't start school with the same kinds of background, experience, and confidence which more advantaged children routinely acquire. Surviving in poverty is a stressful experience for families. Many poor parents are young, perhaps school drop-outs, unskilled and uncertain about parenting. Health problems, beginning with prenatal health deficits, blight the potential of poor children.

We all know those things. We hear them constantly. There's a good deal of truth to them, and we must address those disadvantages. But I'm tired of hearing poor families described only in terms of deficits. And I'm worried that in our efforts to get public sympathy for the needs of poor children, we may have created a monster. We may have encouraged and abetted the perpetuation of schools which are not prepared for poor children.

Too many people -- and too many educators -- now really believe that the burdens which poverty and race impose on children doom them from the start. That lets us off the hook. Too many educators say: "We're trying, but what can you do when these children have so many problems?"

Yes, we need good, available health care. Yes, we need to teach parenting skills. Yes, we need effective early childhood education. Yes, we need to make sure young children have healthy diets and safe, secure

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homes. We need to do all those things to make sure that poor children, especially children of color, are ready for school. South Carolina is trying to make that happen -- by requiring that all children benefit from kindergarten, by working intensively with some of our poorest schools, by developing a parent handbook on preparing children to learn in school, and so on.

But the ways we're describing problems of poverty are not accurate. More and more, poor families are described in pathological terms. We emphasize deficits, but we say very little about strengths. We seem to have forgotten that most parents cherish their children, struggle to help them grow, fight for their welfare as much as possible. We seem to have forgotten that the power of nurturing and love is quite literally a force of life -- without it a baby will die. And we seem to have forgotten that poor children and children of color come to school with many strengths.

A federal study summed up those strengths this way:

> Children from poor and affluent backgrounds alike come to school with important skills and knowledge. They have mastered the receptive and expressive skills of their native language. The particular language or dialect they have acquired may or may not match that of the classroom, but the intellectual feat is equivalent. They have learned basic facts about quantity. . . They have learned much about social

expectations. . . they have a host of knowledge about the world. . .[1]

I'm beginning to believe that in our urgent effort to communicate the devastating effect which poverty has on children and families, we are inadvertently harming those children and families. When we focus only on the pathology of poverty, we may hurt poor children:

- We may communicate to the public at large that poor children, especially poor children of color, are hopelessly disadvantaged when they enter school.
- We may drive our best teachers away from poor schools, because they have absorbed that message and don't want to "waste" their professional careers on a "hopeless" cause.
- We may fundamentally change the instruction in classrooms serving poor children from a pedagogy which builds on strengths, to one which assumes no strengths and very limited capacity to learn.
- Worst of all, we may absorb the low expectations inherent in the pathological view of poverty, and communicate it to the very children most in need of high expectations and a positive self-image.

So let me rephrase the question. Others have focused on how to make poor children ready for school. I'd like to focus on how to make schools ready for poor children.

I've read some very troubling studies. They say, in essence, that the biggest problem facing poor kids is what goes on, or doesn't go on, in their classrooms, rather than in their homes and communities.

Linda Darling-Hammond summarized more than 100 studies of the way poor children and children of color are taught. She said that:

> . . . studies consistently find that new teachers -- those with fewer than three or four years of experience -- tend to be much less effective. ...Especially in the unsupported environment most encounter, beginning teachers experience a wide range of problems in learning to teach: problems with classroom management, motivating students, being aware of and dealing appropriately with individual learning needs and differences, and developing a diverse repertoire of instructional strategies are among the most commonly noted.[2]

She pointed out that many unprepared teachers faced with challenging classrooms who do not know how to teach effectively "often blam[e] students if their teaching is not successful."[3]

The research cited by Darling-Hammond and others demonstrates that inadequate preparation for the task of teaching affects achievement in

reading, language arts, and math, but has perhaps the most impact on teaching reasoning and thinking skills:

> . . . appropriate preparation in planning and classroom management is one of the factors that allows teachers to focus on the kind of complex teaching that is needed to develop higher order skills. Since the novel tasks required for complex problem-solving are more difficult to manage than the routine tasks associated with learning simple skills, lack of management ability can lead teachers to "dumb down" the curriculum in order to more easily control student work.[4]

Researchers have looked at the relationship between preparation for teaching and achievement of poor children and/or children of color in many ways. In a study of classrooms in three Chicago-area school districts, controlling for poverty and race, Robert Dreeben found that:

> . . . socioeconomic circumstances and race hardly affect reading achievement in the primary grades. When black and white children of comparable ability experience the same instruction, they do about equally well, and this is true when the instruction is excellent in quality and when it is inadequate.[5]

Ronald Ferguson compared standardized test scores, teacher salaries, scores on teacher exams, and teaching experience among 900 Texas school districts. He found that:

> Differences in the quality of schooling account for between one-quarter and one-third of the variation among Texas school districts in students' scores on statewide standardized reading exams.[5]

In a national study for the Rand Corporation of math and science instruction within and between schools, Jeannie Oakes traced low math and science achievement by poor and minority students to inequities in curriculum, equipment, "ability" tracking, and teacher qualification. She found that poor students are more likely to be "tracked" in low-ability classes, and to have teachers with less certification, education, and experience. At the secondary school level, disparities are so great that:

> . . . high track students in the least advantaged schools are often taught by teachers who are less qualified than those teaching low-track students in more advantaged schools.[7]

The recent national assessment of Chapter 1 identified teacher preparation and training as key to successful education of poor children. One study by SRI International and Policy Study Associates found that:

> . . . teachers who embarked on curricula and instructional approaches at variance with conventional wisdom were more

likely to have had advanced training and to have had access to, and pursued, a wide range of in-service professional development opportunities.[8]

In a 1989 study for the New York City Board of Education, Eleanor Armour-Thomas looked at poverty, poor achievement, and teacher preparation in elementary and middle schools.[9] Exceptionally high-achieving schools which were overwhelmingly poor and minority were paired with a demographically similar group of low-achieving schools. The study concluded that about 90 percent of that dramatic reading and math score variance was linked to a few school characteristics:

- strong instructional and assessment focus;
- strong instructional and organizational leadership;
- high teacher morale;
- more than five years of teacher experience at the same school;
- professional knowledge beyond the Master's degree;
- years of general educational experience and years of experience in the New York City school system; and
- tenured teachers' appointments

All this research makes clear that student characteristics such as family and community poverty do not predetermine student performance. School characteristics are critically important. The complex ingredients of

effective education -- high expectations, engaging materials, modern equipment, a demanding curriculum, an orderly environment, strong leadership, clear goals, all the correlates of effective schools play a part. But the education, training, and experience of a child's teacher may be the most important ingredient of all. As Darling-Hammond said:

> When the allocation of teachers who are certified or uncertified, prepared or unprepared, experienced or inexperienced is unequal, so is the opportunity for students to learn. The differences in style and content are very real. They are not an abstract proposition.[10]

The research makes clear that across the country, schools serving concentrations of poor children do not have teachers, curriculum, equipment, and supplies equivalent to the average school. Their teachers are, on average, least prepared for the craft of teaching, least experienced, least trained in advanced techniques for effective teaching. And I know from bitter experience that this inequality in teaching resources compounds low expectations for poor kids and poor schools.

As educators, we cannot eradicate poverty. We cannot single-handedly solve -- although we can address -- the income, health, housing, and other problems which hurt the ability of poor families to make their children ready for school. But we can begin to make schools ready for poor children.

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We need to change the way schools serving poor kids are seen, by the public and profession. We need to transform them into the most exciting challenges facing teachers today, places which teachers seek out and stay in because the rewards of success are so great.

That isn't much of a stretch, if we start with the notion that a good, well-trained, caring teacher can make more of a difference by changing the life and future of a poor child than in any other job in education. But I'm a realist. We won't reach that goal just by preaching about high expectations. We have to give teachers the tools for success.

That means overcoming isolation in the classroom and the school by spreading the word about what works, and by creating "learning communities" in schools.

That means solid, effective training in what to teach and how to teach it.

That means teaching children how to think, not just how to spell, from the very beginning.

That means encouraging teachers to seek out opportunities for improving teaching skills.

That means rewarding the risk takers.

That means holding out as examples the teachers who succeed at the hardest jobs - not the ones who take kids who are already ahead of the pack and move them a little farther, but the teachers who take kids who are

way, way behind and move them to a point of pride, confidence, and achievement.

We have two systems now -- one for kids and teachers whom society has already decided are "born" to succeed, and one for kids and teachers whom society has decided are born losers. The kids and the teachers in that second system are both victims. I want to make them both victors.

We can't stop telling the world that poor children and their families need extra help to compete successfully. But let's stop feeding into the perception that they are hopeless cases. Let's look to our own house -- our schools -- to make sure they are ready for poor kids.

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